

How much is too much? Partnerships and power relationships between parents and schools

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Abstract

Developing effective partnerships between parents and teachers are recognised as an effective way of supporting and maintaining student achievement. This critical literature review explores the power relationships that underpin such partnerships and greatly contribute to their success. It will begin by recapping the history of parent-teacher power relationships and looking at examples of the arguments both for and against more parental power in schools. It will then look at school board of trustees as a particularly New Zealand example of attempting to improve parental power and discuss why both these and parent-teacher interviews may fail to meet their projected goals. Finally it will elaborate on some of the suggestions that have been made on improving the power relationships between parents and teachers in order to support partnerships that benefit the student.

Keywords: *Power-relations, Parent-school relationships, Spheres of influence, Parental involvement*



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Introduction

In a New Zealand Herald article published earlier this year, Linley Bilbey describes a growing problem facing schools across the country. Following the high profile legal case involving two rowers from St Bede's College in Christchurch an increasing number of parents have threatened legal action against schools when their children are not selected for sporting, musical and academic teams that represent the school. According to Bilbey (2015), this threatens to undermine the authority of schools, principals and teachers. To me this speaks to a bigger issue at play in education, the power relationships that exist between, schools, teachers and parents. Who has the right to decide what happens at school and where do school and home spheres of influence begin and end?

Traditionally the power relationships between schools and families were particularly one sided. The attitude was that teachers as professionals knew best and that parents should accept their decisions; school and home were separate (Brooking, 2007; Nixon, Martin, McKeown & Ranson, 1997). However now it is widely accepted that home and school have a much more overlapping sphere of influence (Lightfoot, 1981) and that parent involvement in education leads to better social and academic outcomes for the student (DaRos-Voseles, Ede & Fillmore, 2014; Minke, Sheridan, Kim, Ryoo & Koziol, 2014; Mutch and Collins, 2012).

Concerns about parent involvement

Parental involvement in schools can take many forms, from participating in learning and volunteering for sport coaching to school decision making (Casanova, 1996, DaRos-Voseles, Ede and Fillmore, 2014). However, teachers tend to be more comfortable with parents having control of areas that exist outside of the classroom, such as fundraising (Todd and Higgins, 1998). Casanova (1996) expresses concern about the participation of parents in schools warning that parental involvement should not mean parental control of schools. Some parents wish to have a greater level of control over their child's education experience, including what is taught and what grades their child gets. Such parents can have great influence when they are involved in school boards where they push for actions that support their own preferences rather than represent the desires of the school community. Casanova (1996) suggests that by choosing to send their child to school parents need to make a commitment to trusting the ability of teachers and school leaders to successfully manage their child's education. It should be noted that this article is a meta-analysis which draws information from a range of other sources including research articles and opinion based web pages. Although Casanova's article is now relatively outdated, being published in 1996, it still highlights some of the potential issues that may arise when

parents are over involved in schools and begin to control their operation.

Emphasis on parent involvement

While some authors are hesitant at the idea of increased power for parents in schools, others argue that parents need to have more power for the sake of their children. Both Bishop (2003) and Brooking (2007) describe the importance of parents having a greater influence in schooling for Māori and Pacifica students. Power imbalances are a major issue in both New Zealand's education system, and society at large, due to our history of colonialism. This influence leads to Māori and Pacifica students feeling isolated from their education which causes them to devalue its worth (Bishop, 2003). In order for the current power status to change the first step needs to be taken by the dominant middle-class European culture to provide minority families with more information about their child's education. Both parents and students need to have more say in the decision making of school and classroom, in a way that can be clearly understood (Bishop, 2003). Bishop's credibility stems from his work which improves the achievement of Māori students in education. This analysis is based on a range of sources including studies on current practices at Māori-medium schools and his own earlier research (Bishop, 2003).

Board of Trustees

The structure of New Zealand's education system shows the importance we place on parental involvement in schools. In October 1989 a new policy, dubbed "Tomorrow's Schools", was introduced to allow communities to create schools that better suited their needs and values (Robinson, Timperley, Parr & McNaughton, 1994). This led to the formation of the current system of a school board of trustees, elected to oversee and support the effective management of the school (Dyer, 1998). Prior to this many parents felt powerless to influence what happened in their schools so this system was designed to facilitate a higher degree of partnership between teachers and the community (Robinson & Ward, 2004). Dyer (1998) points out that school boards are elected by the community, but specifically by the people who have a vested interest in the management of the school; parents. They are then responsible for upholding the schools charter which expresses the vision the community holds for their children's education (Fiske & Ladd, 2001). Despite these well considered goals for teacher and community partnership Robinson and Ward (2004) suggest there are some difficulties associated with the current way boards of trustees work.

Through interviews involving hypothetical situations that a school board might face Robinson and Ward (2004) found that successful management tends to take priority with little consideration given to how managerial decisions may affect the quality of education. They suggest that a contributing factor to this is the small number of trained educators that are included in school boards, which reduces the influence of educational ideas on decision making (Robinson & Ward, 2004). While successful management is important, school management and educational practices should be considered together rather than independently in order to best meet the needs of the students and the community.

Power sharing

Parent-teacher interviews are intended as a place where parents and teachers can collaborate to build the best possible outcome for their students. It is often the only opportunity that parents and teachers have for face to face communication, especially at secondary school level. However parent-teacher interviews also provide a good example of how parent-teacher power relationships function in schools. Although they are intended to be a productive exercise, very often parent-teacher interviews achieve little because of their ritualistic nature (Lightfoot, 1981, MacLure & Walker, 2000). MacLure and Walker (2000) describe the majority of parent-teacher interviews as being based around a "diagnosis" model where parents sit passively while the teacher informs them of the achievement of their child based off test scores and results. In this situation parents feel as though they have very little power compared to the teacher, who appears as the expert. Parents who feel powerless may attempt to reassert themselves by reminding the teacher of their professional or subject specific knowledge (MacLure & Walker, 2000). When parents finally get to discuss the issues they feel are important there are often conflicting viewpoints that arise (MacLure & Walker, 2000) which causes both sides to act defensively. MacLure and Walker based their study on recorded parent-teacher interviews from five different United Kingdom secondary schools which represented a range of sociocultural background, assessment type and parental attitude to education. In total they included 184 different consultations in their study and although students were present at some of these meeting they focused primarily on the parent and teacher contributions to the discussion. These sources indicate that while parent-teacher partnerships are fully espoused by schools, the follow-through tends to be poor because of the power relationships at play.

What needs to change?

In order to develop working partnerships between parents and teachers it is important to take power relationships into account. Minke, Sheridan, Kim, Ryoo and Koziol (2014) acknowledge that because of the personal and high stakes nature of education the relationships between parents and teachers can be highly emotional which adds to the complexity of such partnerships. Although teachers are often seen as imposing figures, MacLure and Walker (2000) point out that often parents and students help to construct teachers as authoritarian figures by conforming, and expecting teachers to conform, to social stereotypes. Regardless, equality and respect needs to be an integral part of the parent-teacher relationship (Todd & Higgins, 1998). For the partnership to work parents need to display a level of trust in the teacher as a trained and professional educator (Casanova, 1996). Moreover teachers need to respect the place of parents as complementary and valuable educators of their children, after all learning happens within the home as well as at school (Brooking, 2007; Garbacz & Sheridan, 2011; Nixon, Martin, McKeown & Ranson, 1997).

Following qualitative research into the way parents and teachers saw their own and each-others role in the parent teacher relationship, Ludicke and Kortman (2012) describe some guidelines for making it work. They suggest that firstly there needs to be an acknowledgement from both sides of their mutual goal, the best possible outcome for their student and that both have an important role to play in this. There then needs to be recognition that these roles are dynamic and there may be shared

responsibilities. Finally there needs to be a mutual decision made about the boundaries that exist within the partnership in order to more clearly define the rights and responsibilities of both parents and teachers (Ludicke & Kortman, 2012).

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